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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The main character in a work of literature is called the “protagonist.” The protagonist often overcomes a weakness or ignorance to achieve a new understanding by the work’s end. A protagonist who acts with great courage may be called a “hero.” A protagonist of dubious tenacity and questionable virtue is an “antihero.” Readers often debate the virtues and motivations of the protagonists in an attempt to understand whether they are heroic. The protagonist’s journey is made more dramatic by challenges presented by characters with different beliefs. A “foil” provokes the protagonist so as to highlight more clearly certain features of the main character. The most important foil, the “antagonist,” opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The narrative structure of the novel unfolds, as the daughters’ voices follow the mothers’ China stories. Mothers and daughters, though often in conflict, remain the protagonists in their own stories. June Woo is present in each of the four sections, and joins the mothers as a peer at the game table. In the first book, antagonists vary from mothers to Chinese conventions. In the second book, the mothers provide the antagonist for the daughters, guiding and shaping their actions.



Discussion Activities

The Joy Luck Club has many villains or antagonists, but they are not obvious. Rather, all the narrators are faced with obstacles. What kinds of antagonistic forces do they encounter? Cultural traditions? Social prejudice? War? Racial or gender discrimination? As the stories progress, is there any sense that the various characters are fighting against the same thing?



Writing Exercise

Choose a family member. Using the vignettes of the “swan” and the “twenty-six malignant gates” as your model, write a brief story to capture the character of this family member. How does one best capture another’s character through storytelling?



Homework

Have students finish the section “The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates” (pp. 116-144). What does June learn about the musical compositions “Perfectly Contented” and “Pleading Child?”